

## **God Created Beginnings**

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Congregation Har Shalom, Potomac, MD

Rabbi Adam J. Raskin

I think there is a space phase that nearly every child goes through. The mysteries of space, planets, moons, suns and stars is so fascinating, so perplexing, so mind expanding, that it becomes a total preoccupation for some kids when they are first introduced to it...I am definitely in the thick of that phase with my seven year old son, Ezra. He loves to get his hands on anything having to do with astronomy, space travel, or any of the details of the dazzling galaxy surrounding us. And so we take trips to the Air & Space Museum, especially Udvar Hazy out in Virginia. I chaperoned his class trip to the Goddard Space Flight Center...and we read a lot of books about space too. Even the way we talk to each other is infused with space-age jargon. "I love you all the way to Pluto and back." "Abba, you know Pluto is not considered a planet," my seven year old corrects me. "I know, but it's still really far away!" "Oh yeah, well I love you more than the entire universe," he responds. "And nobody knows how far that is, so there!" "Oh yeah, well I love you even more than the universe," I say. To which he responds, "There isn't anything beyond the universe." To which I say, "If the universe is expanding there must be something it's expanding into..." You get the idea...

So now you have a sense of our standard bed time conversation. The truth is that our conversations about space and time and infinity and the universe have kept me on my theological toes. It's not uncommon for my precocious little boy to wonder about where God is in that space-time continuum or to ask how exactly God made the universe come into existence. Not easy questions for anyone, whether a religious Jew or not a Jew at all.

I often tell people that science and faith do not contradict...at least when that faith is Judaism. Just recently in a class of sixth graders in religious school, I told them that the Torah does not intend to be a science book; or a cosmology book; or even a history book. That doesn't mean that those subjects aren't touched upon, but it is not the main focus of the Torah. While those disciplines focus on the nature of life, the Torah focuses on the meaning of life. While science attempts to understand the origins of life, religion seeks deeper meaning about the purpose of life. That being said, however, I can't help but revel in what the famous astronomer Steven Hawking calls the most remarkable discovery of cosmology ever. That discovery, which turned

thousands of years of thinking completely on its head, was that the universe has not existed forever...that it had a definite beginning. Aristotle, the most renowned of the Greek philosophers believed the exact opposite. Anything that was eternal, in Greek philosophy, had to be better than something that was made or created. Hence, the universe, being the ultimate specimen of perfection, had to be eternal. So according to Aristotelian thinking, the universe has always been here and will always be here. Not so, according to scientific discovery after discovery. Today we know that the universe is anything but static. When Edwin Hubble gazed at the sky in the 1920's he was stunned to discover that the galaxies were moving steadily apart from each other. Theories that have attempted to explain movement in the universe while trying to avoid a theologically loaded beginning of time have been repeatedly disproved, like the Steady State Theory. Even atheist or agnostic scientists almost universally suggest that the universe had a specific beginning, which they usually refer to as the Big Bang.

Now again, I am not a scientist, I am a theologian. And so my objective is not to piece together the elements of the fuse that ignited the big bang, but to wonder about what it means for our lives and our existence. I am reminded of the Hasidic teaching that the first words of our Torah: *Bereishit bara Elohim*, usually translated as "In the beginning, God created" can also be translated as "God created beginnings." Among the many things that came into existence at the beginning of time was the possibility to begin again, and again.

Consider the famous midrash about the phrase *vayehi erev*: and there was evening. Rabbi Yehudah bar Rabbi Shimon noticed that the phrase does not say "Let there be evening" in the same way that God spoke other things or commanded other things into existence. Rather the Torah says, and there was evening. Reflecting on this, Rabbi Yehudah says, there was a certain time order that existed even before the first day. Rabbi Abahu then suggests that in that primordial time, God went about creating and destroying various other worlds. We can only wonder about how long that process went on for, but when God created this particular world, God said, This one pleases me; the others did not please me. *Vayar Elohim et kol asher asa* (Gen. 1:31), and God saw all that He had made, *vehinei tov me'od*...and He considered it very good. This one pleases, me; the others did not.

What in the world can this mean? Was God just practicing with those other worlds that he created and then subsequently destroyed? Is God so temperamental or so much of a

perfectionist, or so obsessive compulsive to use a contemporary diagnosis, that He just tossed world after world into the cosmic garbage can until he finally assembled something He liked. It's like the piles of clothes I often find on the bed when someone in my family has a wardrobe crisis...right they try on outfit after outfit, and each unhappy ensemble gets tossed onto a growing pile on the bed until finally a an acceptable outfit is put together. Is this what the Holy One was doing with these throw away universes that preceded ours?

The great Rav Soloveitchik commented on this Midrash that it is preposterous to think that God needed practice in order to create a world that would be tov me'od. God could certainly have gotten it right the very first time. Rather, this whole saga is meant to teach you the blessing of starting over! If God can start over; if God can start from scratch and create something beautiful and remarkable then so can you!

Recently Rabbi Brad Hirschfield, of the Center for Jewish Learning and Leadership, wrote a piece for the Huffington Post provocatively titled: Jews are NOT the People of the Book. Although we clearly have a great intellectual history recorded in volumes upon volumes of sacred literature, and notwithstanding the fact that Jews are great consumers of books, the phrase People of the Book comes from the Koran. Ahl al Kitab, in Arabic, was the way Muslims referred to Jews and Christians who, while not fully Islamic, followed a sacred text that was not problematic to Islam. But Hirschfield's objection to being labeled people of the book has nothing to do with Islam. Rather, he prefers that we be called the People of the Scroll instead. A scroll, unlike a book, keeps on turning. And we celebrate this most precious object in a way "such that the end and the beginning run right into each other." Here is a "flexibility and fluidity" to scrolls that is very different from books...something about a scroll that invites ongoing conversation and adaptation.

Now that we have emerged from the High Holiday season—a season that really began almost two months ago in Elul, then Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Sh'mini Atzeret, Simḥat Torah, and now with our scrolls rolled and cued to another beginning, let us embrace the powerful metaphor renewal that is before us. *Bereishit bara Elohim*: God created beginnings. How does that speak to your life, and your story in this new year? What are you beginning anew in the narrative of your life? May the renewal that is symbolized so thoroughly by this season and this parasha inspire you to be like the

universe we inhabit...constantly growing, expanding, and developing in new, previously uncharted territory. Just as the universe is anything but static, so may it be for you and your life in this new year!